

Rural Colleges as Catalysts for Community Change

The RCCI Experience

Sarah Rubin

The Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) challenges colleges in economically distressed regions to become catalysts for economic and community development and improved access to education. Led by college/community teams, the 24 sites have experimented with a wide variety of strategic approaches. Through their educational and economic development efforts, RCCI teams are demonstrating how community colleges can help build a foundation for improved prosperity in distressed regions.



Since 1994, the Rural Community College Initiative (RCCI) has been exploring how community colleges can be catalysts for change in economically distressed regions. RCCI has 24 sites in Appalachia, the South's Black Belt and its tobacco/textile belt, the western Indian reservations, the Rio Grande Valley, and New Mexico (fig. 1). Many RCCI regions have lost their historic job base of mining, farming, timber, or manufacturing, while others have never had a viable economy. A few RCCI regions are becoming popular tourism/retirement areas where rapid growth threatens to overwhelm traditional culture, while low-income residents fail to reap the benefits of an expanding economy.

Despite their diversity in race, ethnicity, geography, and economic base, RCCI communities share common economic and social challenges. Educational levels are low. A sense of powerlessness derives

from absentee ownership of land and resources, a one-industry economy, and/or high dependence on government programs and transfer payments. And many of these communities are divided by conflicts between racial or ethnic groups, between rich and poor, or between natives and newcomers.

The Ford Foundation has funded RCCI from 1994 through 2001. It launched the Initiative, in collaboration with the nonprofit research organization MDC Inc., based on the conviction that economic development and improved access to education must be pursued together if distressed rural communities are to lift themselves out of poverty. RCCI's dual emphasis on economic development and education responds to the dilemma often voiced by rural developers: A community cannot attract or develop jobs without an educated workforce, but it cannot retain educated workers without a strong economy.

This dilemma hits especially hard in persistently poor rural regions, which have extremely low educational attainment, poor public schools, low levels of entrepreneurship, and little in the way of amenities to attract new business. In these regions, there are no quick fixes that will yield prosperity. Communities must build a foundation for development and work long term to bring about change.

The dual focus on education and economic development led the Ford Foundation and MDC to community and tribal colleges as agents for change. (Tribal colleges are 2- or 4-year colleges on Indian reservations, chartered by their tribes to provide education and preserve tribal culture.) Community colleges are institutions with the capacity and mandate to be involved in both place-based economic development and people-based education and training strategies. As "common ground" institutions, respected by

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the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, community colleges can be a safe, neutral meeting place for forging collaborative approaches to community development. More than most organizations, they are highly regarded by people of all social classes. Community colleges have a broad mission, and they have the stature, stability, and flexibility to provide leadership for

regional development. In many rural communities, they are the only institutions with a broad community-service mission and a stable stream of public funding.

There are hundreds of rural community and tribal colleges across the United States. The Ford Foundation and MDC envisioned that if RCCI demonstrated how a small group of rural colleges could

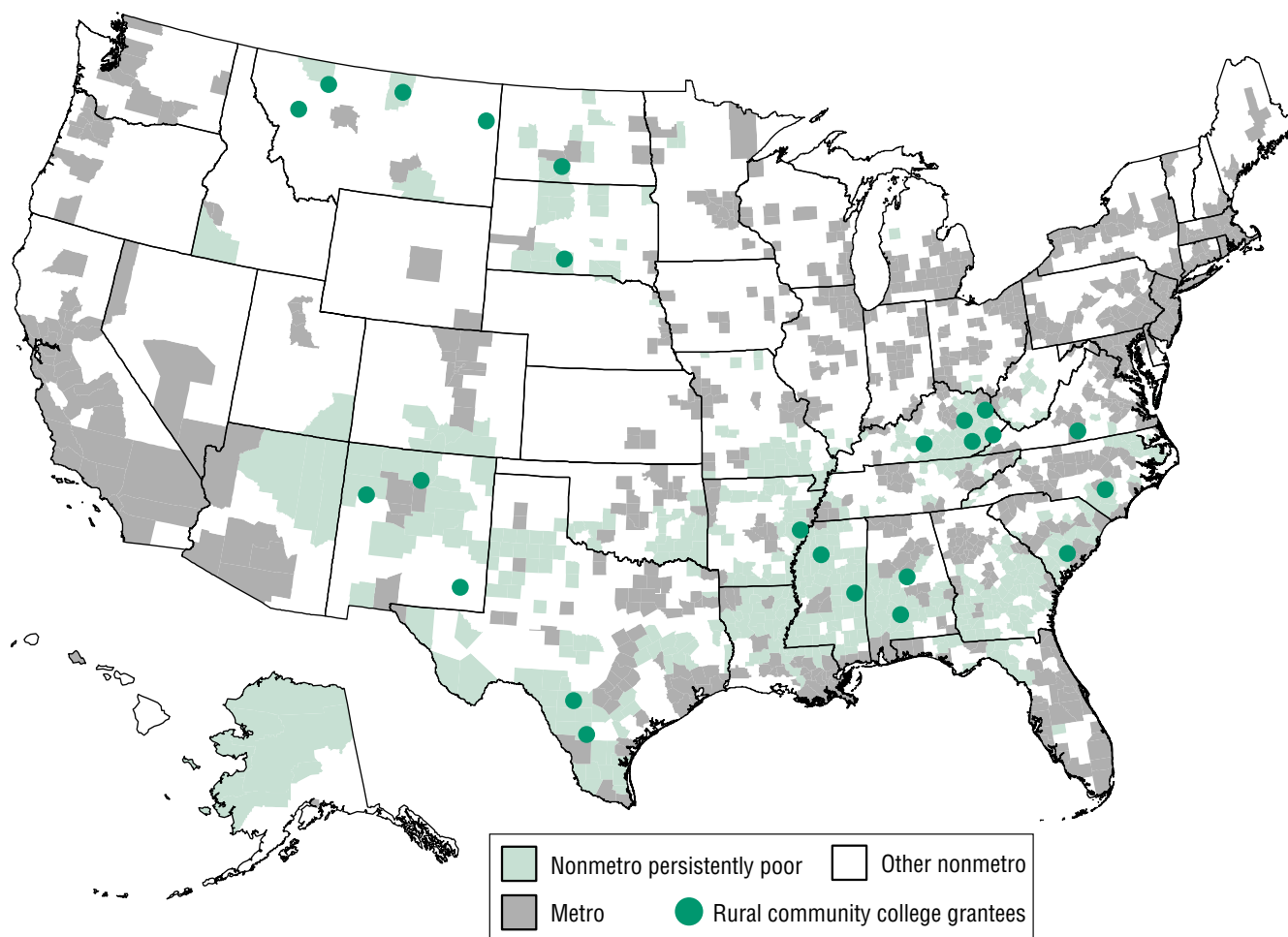
bring about change in their communities, the model could spread widely throughout rural America.

The 24 colleges that participate in RCCI receive modest planning and implementation grants from the Ford Foundation. They participate in learning and networking events. They receive onsite “coaching” from MDC and technical assistance from national experts on eco-

Figure 1

Colleges in the Rural Community College Initiative, 1997

Most RCCI colleges are located in counties with high levels of poverty



Note: Persistent-poverty counties had poverty rates above 20 percent in every decennial census since 1960.

Source: Poverty counties prepared by ERS based on decennial census data, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990.

nomic development and educational access. The first 9 colleges joined the Initiative in 1994; the other 15 received their first grants in 1997.

After 3-6 years on the ground, RCCI has yielded lessons about community colleges as catalysts for change in distressed rural areas, and its experiences can inform other organizations working for rural development.

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A Process for Collaboration and Community Change

While RCCI has a distinct philosophy and strategic directions, it does not impose particular programs or strategies on sites. Rather, it fosters a climate of innovation that will spark local solutions.

RCCI provides a process designed to build broad-based collaboration between college and community and bring about long-term change. Each site forms a leadership team with members representing the college and the community. The team uses a strategic planning method called "Moving from Vision to Action" to analyze economic opportunities and educational needs in the region, articulate a vision, and set goals. The team then explores strategic alternatives, which may include new initiatives of the college and joint college/community efforts.

This team-led, collaborative process results in a plan of action that addresses important problems in the community. The team becomes a "home base" for a core group of individuals with a shared vision for their region who engage others to create a critical mass for change. Over a period of years, the team expands and continues to provide leadership. Perhaps most important, the RCCI team models an important process that characterizes healthy, successful communities—inclusive decision-making. When seeded by RCCI, this approach can spread to other community endeavors.

Southeast Community College in Cumberland, Kentucky, illustrates what this process can accomplish. Southeast's RCCI team, now in its fifth year, functions as a "think tank," generating and spinning off community development and education initiatives. Dr. Bruce Ayers, Southeast's president, says, "The team, including people from outside the college, has made the difference. It has been the catalyst for change and has opened doors for us—enabled us to make inroads into the community that we wouldn't have made otherwise." The team includes the college president and selected faculty and staff, business owners, a banker, a former coal miner, elected officials, grassroots leaders, K-12 teachers/administrators, and human service agency staff. This diverse, yeasty mix of folks, who before RCCI had not worked together, has looked hard at community problems, come up with innovative solutions, and brought in the resources and partners needed to implement new projects.

Southeast Community College serves three counties in the heart of the Kentucky coalfields—Harlan,

Bell, and Letcher. Like much of Appalachia, the region suffers from loss of mining employment, little business development, and weak public schools with a low college attendance rate. Local politics are dominated by a small group that has held control for years. The team decided to tackle these problems head-on with projects to: (1) make more capital available for new business development, (2) help disadvantaged young people attend college, and (3) broaden the base of community leadership through leadership development programs.

Southeast's work on business development finance illustrates how the college/community team provided the determination, innovative ideas, and the right mix of leadership to make things happen. The team began by holding a day-long community workshop where business and civic leaders discussed barriers to small business development in their counties and learned about development finance models from around the country. After the workshop, team member Ken Thomas, President of Harlan National Bank, and RCCI Coordinator Paul Pratt talked with local banks about creating a community development corporation. Five banks signed on to form the Pine Mountain Community Development Corporation, creating a \$105,000 loan fund for small businesses that could not qualify for conventional loans. The college provided a staff person (Paul Pratt) to screen loan applicants and provide technical assistance to borrowers.

The initial fund was lent out within a year, indicating a high unmet demand for microloans in the region. (Since 1997, the fund has written 17 loans ranging from \$800 to \$25,000 and has helped

Economic Development

Roles for Rural Community Colleges

- Mobilize regional leadership for economic development.
- Be the center of a regional workforce development system attuned to employers' changing needs.
- Promote technology transfer and competitiveness.
- Promote entrepreneurship and small business development.
- Develop programs that target poor people while creating jobs.
- Encourage a strong education ethic.

Source: MDC, Expanding Economic and Educational Opportunity in Distressed Rural Areas: A Conceptual Framework for the RCCI, Chapel Hill, NC, May 1998.

establish 70 jobs.) Building on the experience of the Pine Mountain CDC and with encouragement from the RCCI team, Paul Pratt approached the numerous loan funds that serve eastern Kentucky and urged them to pay more attention to the southeastern corner of the State, an area that had been largely ignored. After 2 years, these conversations have led to the creation of the Appalachian Development Alliance, eight development funds that will pool resources and access new sources of public and private capital for business development throughout eastern Kentucky.

Economic Development Strategies

Across the country, workforce education is the most widespread contribution of community colleges to economic development, and RCCI encourages colleges to provide high-quality workforce education. But it also urges them to look beyond workforce development—especially in places where there is a small or shrinking job base—and be more proactive in building the economy.

Within the spectrum of potential economic development roles (see “Economic Development: Roles for Community Colleges”), the areas that have sparked the most activity within RCCI are mobilizing regional leadership and

In the RCCI, ‘economic development’ means creating jobs, raising incomes, generating wealth, and reinvesting that wealth in the region’s businesses, institutions, and people. It means increasing the overall level of economic activity in the region—creating opportunities for people to start and operate profitable businesses, do productive work, and raise their standard of living. And it means targeting economic opportunity to people who have been left out. (RCCI, Conceptual Framework)

entrepreneurship/small business development. This is not surprising, given the nature of RCCI regions. Small business development is a logical strategy in rural communities that are unlikely to attract businesses from the outside.

Leadership strategies are important because in many RCCI regions, there is no widely shared vision for the community and power is held by a narrow group. Civic alignment—shared commitment among key stakeholders to improving the quality of life for the whole community—has been weak or absent in most RCCI communities. By preparing new people for leadership roles, introducing new ideas about economic development, and initiating a broad-based dialogue on the region’s future, RCCI colleges are bringing about alignment in their communities. They are helping create a foundation for equitable economic development.

Mobilizing regional leadership. RCCI teams have provided leadership for regional development in three ways: organizing economic summits; initiating community

leadership programs; and leading regional planning efforts.

Economic summits are designed to engage citizens in discussions about the region’s future and introduce them to new ideas about development. The summit at



Photo courtesy Dale Simms, USDA/ERS.

Southwest Texas Junior College in Uvalde was a case competition, where MBA students from four universities studied the region's economy, devised economic development strategies, and presented their ideas to a panel of regional leaders and international experts in a competition for prize money. Technical College of the Lowcountry in Beaufort, South Carolina, brought together leaders from its fragmented four-county service area to consider options for regional development. The college's status as a neutral institution helped leaders put aside their usual provincialism and begin discussing how they could work together.

Mountain Empire Community College in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, brought national experts on community development to their 1999 "Moving Mountains Economic Summit" to introduce local citizens to new ideas and strategies. New Mexico State University-Carlsbad studied the method Chattanooga had used to engage citizens in an urban revitalization effort and then tried out a similar grassroots approach in their city of 25,000. After 6 months of planning, nearly 2,000 people attended a daylong

event in the fall of 2000 to express their vision for the community's future. In both Carlsbad and Big Stone Gap, citizens are working on strategies that emerged from the meetings.

Community leadership programs have been initiated by some RCCI teams to encourage and empower more people to participate in community affairs. In Meridian, Mississippi; southeast Kentucky; southwestern Virginia; and Carlsbad, New Mexico, the college/community teams designed leadership programs to reach out to folks who don't normally sign up for Chamber of Commerce leadership programs—including young adults, members of racial and ethnic minority groups, and lower-income people. In the Meridian program, now entering its second year, the 32 participants have started several community development projects, including a new information referral service for social service agencies and a collaborative effort to better serve children in poverty.

Sitting Bull College, a tribal college serving the Standing Rock Reservation in North and South Dakota, has filled a vacuum in its

region by leading a planning process for economic development. The RCCI team organized community meetings all over the reservation to develop a plan for spending millions of dollars owed to the tribe by the Federal Government. The money was earmarked for economic development and could not be released until the tribe reached consensus on a plan.

How have these leadership efforts helped lay a foundation for economic development? The Southwest Texas case competition, held in 1998, has had the longest time to bear fruit. It sparked a new sense of regionalism in a large, multicounty area. Towns that had never collaborated began talking about regional development, and these efforts led to the area's designation as a rural Enterprise Community. In the other communities, new people are involved in shaping their communities' future, whether through participation in a leadership program or in discussions about regional development. While it is too soon to see long-term impact, in all these places there is a new sense of empowerment and optimism about revitalizing the community.

Entrepreneurship and small business development. Several RCCI sites have targeted small business development as the centerpiece of their economic development strategy. Tribal colleges Salish Kootenai and Fort Belknap, both in Montana, have started or expanded business assistance centers. The center at Fort Belknap College provides Internet access, technical assistance, and training to prospective entrepreneurs. In its first 3 years, the center at Salish Kootenai College helped clients start 100 businesses, including 15 microenterprises owned by former welfare recipients. Salish Kootenai College also has developed a new entrepreneurship curriculum geared to Native Americans that is being used by several other tribal colleges. This curriculum helps aspiring Indian business owners deal with the conflict between communally focused tribal culture and individualistic, entrepreneurial values. It profiles successful Indian business owners as role models.

Some RCCI sites have started small business incubators in partnership with other agencies. Southeastern Community College in Whiteville, North Carolina, manages two incubators in buildings owned by the local electric co-op. The older of the two, in operation since 1991, has produced 9 successful businesses and 645 jobs. Southwest Texas Junior College recently started an “e-commerce incubator” to help local businesses with web-based marketing. In 1999, Northern New Mexico Community College in Espanola partnered with the Johnson Controls Company to create a “kitchen incubator” on campus—a specialized facility that helps start up food-processing businesses. The college teaches food-processing

classes at the incubator, and it provides space, equipment, and technical assistance to help entrepreneurs produce and market salsas, jams, and other food products made from local crops.

Because of the rich artisan tradition in many RCCI regions, some sites have targeted handcrafts as a promising small business sector. Hazard Community College in eastern Kentucky is building a new campus that will specialize in traditional Appalachian arts; plans include classes, an incubator for handcraft businesses, and a retail store. Other RCCI teams are exploring collaborative web-based marketing of handcrafted products from their regions.

Improving Access to Education

Community college advocates pride their institutions on access, which usually means simply that community colleges are low-cost, open-door institutions where anyone with a high school diploma or equivalency can enroll. RCCI takes access several steps further. “For RCCI, the term ‘access’ encompasses both access to the college and access through the college to expanded opportunities—including further education and productive, rewarding work” (RCCI, Conceptual Framework). This notion is further elaborated in table 1.

RCCI sites have expanded educational access in several significant ways. They are helping prepare middle and high school students for college and helping disadvantaged students succeed in college; they are preparing unemployed adults for work and providing skills training to adults in the workforce; they are using distance learning to extend college courses to people living in remote areas. A few examples will give a flavor of

the diverse access activities at RCCI sites.

Partnerships with secondary schools. Meridian Community College (Meridian, Mississippi) has organized “MathFirst,” an ambitious effort to improve public education in the community. (Such partnerships are increasingly present in larger cities but rare in small towns.) In 2 years, the group has raised \$5.3 million for improved school programs, including reading programs in the elementary schools and new math curricula in middle and high schools. The city and county school districts have started “Parents as Teachers Programs” to help parents prepare their children for success in school. The community college has lowered its student/teacher ratio in math classes from 30-1 to 20-1. MathFirst has involved many citizens in the schools, resulting for the first time in parents helping to select new principals for three schools.

Focus on families. Fort Peck Community College, a tribal college serving the Fort Peck Reservation in north-central Montana, decided early in RCCI that the best way to serve its community was to strengthen families, the core unit of community. The college has opened a community wellness center, which provides exercise classes, diabetes management, and nutrition counseling. It has initiated youth programs and has helped start two preschools where children learn their native tribal language. The college reorganized itself, creating a Department of Family and Community Development to keep family well-being at the center of its outreach efforts.

Welfare to work. Moving people from welfare to work is a particular challenge in distressed rural areas where jobs are scarce.

Table 1

Access to education: Approaches for the future*New economic realities in rural America demand an expanded definition of access*

Typical past and current approaches	Approaches for the future
"Open door" admissions	Aggressive outreach to groups that need education, including young high school dropouts, working and unemployed adults
Primary goal is enrollment	Multiple institutional goals emphasize positive outcomes for students, including retention, graduation, and placement in further education and jobs. College helps each student achieve his or her individual goals
Emphasis on credentials – awarding of degrees and certificates	Emphasis on competencies – learning what one needs now, while keeping the door open for future learning, as well as graduation and certification
Emphasis on teaching	Emphasis on learning – student-centered, individualized approach
College relationship with students begins at age 18	College works with middle and high schools to prepare more students for postsecondary education and raise the college-going rate in the region
Enroll those who can travel to campus	Extend classes to people in remote areas and at worksites
College operates in isolation from other educational institutions	Strong links with secondary schools and 4-year colleges/universities

Source: MDC, Expanding Economic and Educational Opportunity in Distressed Rural Areas: A Conceptual Framework for the RCCI, Chapel Hill, NC, May 1998.

Coahoma Community College in Clarksdale, Mississippi, has had success in linking welfare recipients in isolated Delta towns to jobs in casinos as a first rung on the employment ladder. The college arranged an "adopt-a-town" partnership between the Grand Casino in Tunica and 26 small towns in the Mississippi Delta. The college provides pre-employment training and offers opportunities for skills upgrading for workers. The casino provides transportation for the first 6 months, until the worker can afford his or her own transporta-

tion. So far, over 1,000 people have been employed through this program, and over 650 have left the welfare rolls.

Distance learning/telecommunications. Several RCCI colleges have initiated distance-learning networks to link their campuses with K-12 schools and universities, hospitals, and other community agencies. Southwest Texas Junior College formed a partnership with 21 school districts in its service area to create a distance-learning network. In 1996, the college and school districts pooled their resources to hire

a grant writer who raised several million dollars for equipment and infrastructure. Today, the college offers many courses via interactive television to remote high schools and to its satellite campuses.

Challenges and Lessons

After working with the RCCI sites for 6 years, MDC is convinced that community colleges can be effective catalysts for change in distressed rural areas. However, given the economic forces working against these regions, it is not easy.

Clearly, involvement in educational access comes more easily to colleges than does economic and community development. But RCCI colleges have shown they can help build a foundation for improved prosperity in their communities not just through education and workforce training but also by mobilizing regional leadership, nurturing new leadership, and providing support for small business development.

Community and tribal colleges are institutions with big missions and small budgets. Their faculty and staff wear many hats and are stretched thin, and funding for non-instructional activities is scarce. At tribal colleges, funding is barely adequate even for traditional college activities. The small RCCI grants provided by the Ford Foundation (\$50,000-75,000 a year) have helped by providing seed money to support a new staff position or free up a faculty member to work on community development. The grants have enabled the colleges to host meetings, travel to learning events, and invest in professional development. Many sites have leveraged substantial funding for RCCI-generated projects.

Even more important than the grants have been the learning opportunities provided by RCCI. In focus group discussions, many college presidents and team members have said the peer-learning aspect of RCCI was instrumental in introducing them to new ideas and providing moral support for the intense personal commitment that ultimately made things happen in their site. Exposure to national experts in educational access and economic development was also important. And being part of a national demonstration program allowed their colleges to take risks and try new things that they would not otherwise have done.

Not every rural community college is ready to become a catalyst for community change. The RCCI colleges that have been most effective in sparking community change had three factors in common. First, each had a president and/or RCCI

team leader with strong personal commitment to improving economic opportunity in the region and a vision for community change. Second, as institutions, they had a level of financial and organizational stability that allowed the president and others to devote attention to nonacademic concerns. Third, they were flexible institutions—open to new ideas and ready to build their capacity to take on new roles.

In every place where RCCI has had an impact on the community, the college itself has also changed. Presidents and team leaders describe their institutions as becoming more “entrepreneurial,” more sensitive to their rural clientele, more serious about outreach, and more community-focused. Involvement of community members on the RCCI team, along with the strategic planning process undertaken by the team, helped bring about these changes.

RCCI is unique among rural development initiatives in its geographic and cultural diversity. When RCCI teams visit each other’s campuses for learning events, Indians from the Northern Plains interact with Latinos from the Southwest and Blacks and Whites from the Deep South and Appalachia. Team members have told us that this cross-cultural learning has been one of the most valuable aspects of RCCI.

In an effort to continue such learning opportunities—and to speak out together for their communities’ needs—the RCCI colleges recently created the Rural Community College Alliance. The Alliance is a membership organization open to any rural college that is committed to the values of RCCI. Founding members hope to expand the Alliance and continue its life well beyond the end of the RCCI grant period. **RA**

For Further Reading . . .

MDC, *Expanding Economic and Educational Opportunity in Distressed Rural Areas: A Conceptual Framework for the Rural Community College Initiative*, Chapel Hill, NC, May 1998.

MDC has produced many print and video materials for RCCI, which are available to the public. These include the *RCCI Toolkit* (a rich compilation of resources on rural development strategies and process), the *Rooster* (free RCCI newsletter), and several policy papers. These and other resources are described on the RCCI website at www.mdcinc.org/rcci. For more information about RCCI or the Rural Community College Alliance, contact Sarah Rubin at MDC, srubin@mdcinc.org or 919/968-4531. The American Association of Community Colleges is currently completing a multiyear assessment of RCCI for the Ford Foundation. For copies of their publications, see “Initiatives” at www.aacc.nche.edu.